

How the Aeroplane came to Madras by Jeff Evans



It is a warm, sunny day in March. The right day for a picnic outing.

The locale is Islands Grounds, Madras. It looks as though the whole city is gathered there.

The rich and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple-minded, they are all there, coming in an endless stream to a vast enclosure cordoned off from curious eyes by a man-high palm leaf thatching held together with stiff bamboo poles.

The vast enclosure has several gates: entrance is by a fee, varying from two annas to five rupees. The poor squat on the bare ground, while chairs are provided for the affluent, the officials, the sahibs. A band is in attendance and plays western tunes that reminds you of a circus show.

What is that has brought all this crowd together?

A real aeroplane that flies!

The wonder is not that it flies, but that it has been made in Madras itself! The vast concourse eagerly looks in the direction of a big, kite-like machine, its two small wheels touching the ground, two horizontal wings of cloth, a body narrowing towards the rear, a small engine and a fan blade in front.

The band suddenly strikes a loud note. A tall white man, dressed in polo attire- Jodhpurs and a full shirt, with a peaked cap on his head- briskly walks towards the contraption grounded in the distance. Acclamation greets him. Acknowledging the cheers with a wave of his hand, he jauntily approaches the machine, checks this lever and- that button, goes round it once or twice, eyes everything and, satisfied that it's all in good order, waves his hand and jumps into the seat in the body of the machine. His head shows above the opening, and every movement of his is visible. He puts on his goggles and, with the turn of something, sets the engine into motion. It starts with a purr and the blade in front starts rotating.

His assistants move away from the machine, and the plane starts moving on the ground. Slowly it makes a circle, so that every one can have a clear view of the plane and its occupant, and then with a deafening increase in noise starts running fast on the ground.

Running like this for about a furlong or two, the machine slowly leaves the ground and goes up in the air!

A rousing cheer goes up from the crowd at the miracle they have all witnessed.

Now the aeroplane is high in the air, "more than three or four palmyrah trees' height", and continues to ascend. It is moving fast in the direction of the sea eastward, and becomes visibly small.

About half an hour later, it is on the way back, first a small bird-like thing, then gradually becoming bigger. Approaching Island Grounds, it is seen losing height. At the edge of the grounds, it is almost on level with the earth, and in a few minutes it touches land, ploughing lightly in to the grass and throwing off dirt and dust.

With a bump, the aeroplane runs some distance and slows down and stops almost at the place from where it started.

The "driver" of the plane, still visible, is all smiles and waves his right hand in jubilant exhilaration. - The crowd roars its acclamation. -

The assistants rush to the plane, check everything, and pour petrol into the plane's tank from tin cans.

The plane is ready for another flight.

After a few more of these flights, the white man leaves his plane, comes briskly towards the crowd and says "Come on, one of you! I will take you for a free ride!"

The plane, it seems, can carry a passenger beside the driver, but there are no volunteers. Turning to the people squatting on the ground, He says: "Come on, one of you! Are you too afraid of death? No risk, absolutely none, Come!"

At this, a boy stands up, but immediately those around him try to pull him down. "You'll be killed! someone hisses.

But the white man, noticing the brave lad, silences them and advancing towards the boy calls him to come out of the crowd.

The boy jumps forward and in a minute stands by the white man.

They walk towards the plane, the white man lifts the boy and places him in a seat behind the driver's seat and then gets himself.

Fastening the boy with a belt to the seat, he starts the engine and in a few minutes is off the ground.

The crowd gapes in amazement. The plane goes out over the sea.

Then they are back. The plane touches the ground with a bump and after a short run comes to stop. The white man jumps out, unties the

belt of the boy and lifts him out of the plane. The lad joyously joins his friends.

The next day, the Madras dailies are full of reports on the public demonstration of flight by a plane built in Madras and flown by a Madras man. There is even a lead-cut picture of the plane in one of the papers.

The witheman who flew the plane is D'Angelis, a French hotelier of repute in Madras.

The year and date: March, 1910.

The first-hand account of the first plane flight in Madras I owe to a contemporary Madras report, supplemented with a detailed personal account by P.R.S Vasan, the boy who flew in the plane.

Vasan retired as a Foreman of the Kolar Gold Fields. He was from Tirunelveli District and was a boyhood friend of the poet Bharati.

Barhati's India the Tamil weekly, published from Pondicherry, in its March 1910 issue reported the Madras Flight.

D'Angelis, the Frenchman, owned a hotel in Madras named after him. It was among the best hotels in the city; many years later, it changed hands and became Hotel Bossoto, then Airlines Hotel. - it was located in the big corner building on Mount Road near Round Tana, where the Bata shoe shop is.

D'Angelis had been following the papers from Paris describing the attempts by Bleriot and others. Getting enough clues and technical data from these reports, he was spurred to build a plane of his own in Madras.

Simpson coach Builders for decades, seemed the natural choice for work facilities. It was a simple structure, a light open body, an open cockpit. wings of canvas stretched taut on wire frames, an ordinary motor car engine fixed in front to rotate a propeller. -

D'Angelis was elated when the trial flights in Pallavaram proved successful. Improving on the first model, he fitted the plane with more powerful engines and then, These too being successful, with a showmanship second-nature to Frenchmen, arranged the public demonstration at Island Grounds, charging an entry fee. -

According to the India weekly, D'Angeli's plane had been preceded three months earlier by another flight in Calcutta, which was said to be the first aeroplane flight in India. The Calcutta plane is said to have been built by an unnamed Punjabi and flown by him in Calcutta on December 30, 1909.

(Unknown reports and name about The Punjabi?).

This would mean that India had its first plane within exactly six years of the World's first flight. And Madras had his plane three months later. -

The news report in India starts with the statement that, because of poverty, there is no initiative among the Indian people to create new inventions. It goes on to say: "We reported some time back the flight of a plane in Calcutta and flown. Now another plane is being built in Madras. The work is going on in the English Workshop of Simpson's. Designed by D'Angelis the owner of the well-known hotel on Mount Road, the machine is being built by Tamil workers. The Manager of Simpson's is supervising the work."

Initially the plane was tested with a 12-horsepower engine. The test flight near Madras city proved successful.

Now, they are going to test it installing a 20-horsepower engine. The total weight of this aeroplane, including the engine and the driver, is only 700 pounds.

"Later, the plane will be fitted with a 25-horsepower engine and then shown to the public."

"We hope that our Indian people too would soon enough take interest in such things"

It was typical of Bharati to bemoan the lack of Indian interest in such innovations, but added that the Madras plane though designed by a Frenchman was built by Tamil workers.

(Going through our old clipping files, we came across a series of five articles R.A. PADMANABHAN, a veteran Journalist, wrote for the now sadly defunct "Indian Review": Today, the subjects of these articles have become commonplace or have vanished, but we publish the series as a reminder of their beginnings, This is the fourth article in the series.)



